

The righteousness of the prude and the righteousness of the lover

Martin Luther went looking for God—and found Christ on the cross.

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



(Source Illustrations by francescoch / iStock / Getty)

It's one of those dialogues that can only take place in a university. In a small seminar on psychiatry and religion, faculty members from the medical school and the divinity school are sitting on opposite sides of a table discussing how medicine and religion can heal the human spirit. The divinity school speaker briefly outlines the life-giving elements of the Christian message. When he finishes, one of the young residents replies, "I grew up in a Christian home. I never experienced the healing of the spirit you talk about or what you have repeatedly called 'grace,' but only 'do this, do that,' or 'don't do this, don't do that.'"

For a moment the conversation is suspended in midair. It is painfully clear to me that at the mention of "gospel" this young man hears only "law" and that the only Christian home he has ever known is a house of boundaries. I note a small worm of

self-satisfaction in my diagnosis of his condition. Then, to amplify his point, he adds, “I have a patient who thinks she has sinned against God and that God knows what she is thinking. Can you imagine that?”

Oh dear, I can imagine that. I quietly take stock of my own mental health—and keep my mouth shut. I recall Augustine’s metaphor for the soul as a house that needs cleaning. Are there rooms in my house I would rather my Lord didn’t visit? asks Augustine. Absolutely. Then, relenting, he invites the Lord to enter all the rooms and to view the thoughts and secrets of his heart.

The implication of the young doctor’s statement is obvious to everyone in the room. Christianity is an unhealthy religion. It creates burdens of guilt where none should exist. Even though he grew up in a Christian home, the only Christianity he has experienced is bondage, from which he is now free at last.

I suppose answers could be given and defenses made. But before we get defensive, we must recognize that the man has a point. We owe it to him to listen carefully to his testimony.

Christians are at home with guilt. The message of God’s goodness comes with an inevitable negative. In Shakespeare’s *Othello* the villain Iago says of Cassio, his friend, “He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.” The notion of ugly rears its head whenever one speaks of the beauty of God. What does God’s beauty make me?

“I, a poor miserable sinner” begins the confession I recited weekly as a child. In the classic allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, one of the things that makes Christian’s journey toward the heavenly city so hard is the suitcase filled with sins he carries on his back.

So, the accuser points his finger at us and says, “You Christians really love to wallow in your own sins. You make your confession every week, but do you hear the absolution—and live it? Do you really hear the voice of God when your pastor says, ‘I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins’?”

The Reformation began with a man who, finally, after much pain, got the absolution. When the word of grace made contact with this tinderbox of a soul named Martin Luther, it set off such a conflagration that we really should call it not a reformation but a revolution in our understanding of God.

We make our confession every week. But do we hear the absolution—and live it?

But this revolution did not begin with the actions of a rebellious monk in October of 1517. The original revolution is the gospel of Jesus Christ that sets us free from the power of sin, the curse of the law, and the finality of death. It enters our atmosphere like an uncharted meteor. The gospel reveals a side of God (which is really the heart of God) that not even the wisest philosophers or theologians saw coming. Just when we are expecting a No!, or at best a Maybe, there is, as Luther exclaims in one of his sermons, “a Yes in the heart of God!”

Paul calls such generosity the *righteousness* of God, which is often translated as the *justice* of God. “But now, apart from law,” he writes in Romans, “the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (3:21–22). This righteousness is not a virtue or a quality that’s easily translated. It doesn’t help to look it up in a dictionary. When I try to understand righteousness, it’s enough for me to think of it as God’s very self.

But how does one make contact with God’s very self? Luther taught the church how to read the Bible, suggesting that when we want to learn more about the gospel, we should consult the New Testament. When we do that, we realize that the New Testament is a chronicle of one crisis after another. Which is to say, it looks an awful lot like our lives: someone is sick, someone is dying, someone is dead, someone is grieving, someone is possessed, someone is angry, someone is guilty, a church is divided, a boy is lost in the far country.

Luther had a word for these multiple crises that crack open our lives and leave us raw and exposed. He said that God comes to us by means of *Anfechtung*.

Anfechtung is the ugly German word for struggle, testing, or turmoil. It is Jacob wrestling with the angel; it’s Jeremiah plagued by self-doubt; it’s the anonymous man in the Gospels confessing (while his son is writhing in the throes of a seizure), “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” It is Jesus on the cross, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“The more I want Him—the less I am wanted . . . there is that separation—that terrible emptiness, that feeling of the absence of God.” These are the words not of Luther but of another troubled soul, Mother Teresa, now St. Teresa of Calcutta. They remind us of how we sometimes struggle to know the God who lives on the dark side

of the moon, cloaked in the mystery of simply “being God,” who is darkness and not light. Luther made the beginner’s mistake of trying to get to know God where God is hardest to know, where God does not want to be known, that is, in God’s moral perfection. His attempt to do just that proved to be a disaster.

When we read the life stories of men and women of faith, we are often surprised by how many profess to have loved God before they found Jesus. But not Luther. In a brief memoir written the year before he died, he confesses the opposite: “I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punished sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, I was angry with God.” He remembers nothing but rage until, by the mercy of God, he learns from Paul that the righteousness of God comes only as a gift with no strings attached. In a phrase many mainline Christians seem to have forgotten, Luther adds, “Here I felt that I was altogether ‘born again’ and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

Luther’s experience demonstrates that there are two kinds of righteousness.

One form of righteousness is so pure and holy that it cannot stand to be touched by anything less than itself. That is the righteousness of the prude. It is a moral perfection to which everything and everyone else is a pollutant. It’s bad enough to hang around with people who think like that. We can’t survive a God like that.

A second form of righteousness is so pure and holy that it cannot help but share its goodness with others. That is the righteousness of the divine lover. Even if you’ve been brought up to believe that God’s righteousness is of the first variety, once you get to know Jesus, you know that God is a giver, not a hoarder, of love.

If love is a gift, it means that we are *justified*—another of Paul’s favorite words—or made right in God’s sight. And if everything is a gift, Paul asks defiantly, “what has become of our boasting?” (Rom. 3:27).

I remember the citywide Reformation festivals of my childhood in St. Louis: the chartered buses filled with ardent Lutherans from surrounding counties and across the river in Southern Illinois, the massed choirs, the fiery sermons on “grace,” the denunciations of the Catholics and their mistakes. Our St. Louis Cardinals never won a pennant in those days, but we always had Reformation Day. To a 12-year-old boy, it was—wonderful.

What has become of our boasting? Our boasting took the form of our own purity, which we had inherited from our ancestors but without going through their *Anfechtung*, their struggle. We had never stood condemned by the law. We had not wrestled with God or been sifted by Satan, as Luther and others had. We were mere inheritors.

Isaac Watts wrote, “Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, / save in the death of Christ my God!” The old boasting—of Paul’s era, and of Watts’s day, and of my youth—continues even as it takes on new forms. When hallowed slogans like “grace alone” or “faith alone” become an excuse for anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism, as happens in many churches, then we have fumbled the gift and lost it. There are those who boast in traits over which they have no control: the Whiteness of their skin, their European heritage, their birth in a Christian family, their straight sexual orientation. When White supremacists, anti-Semites, or homophobes make their noxious claims, they are not just pumping their fists in the air. They are sinning against the gift.

How do we let go of this stuff that Paul calls “refuse”—or what translators politely term “dung” (Phil. 3:8)? He shows us how to let go: “One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, straining toward what lies ahead, I press on to the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14). I read these words and remember the title of a fine book by F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*.

When Garrison Keillor pokes fun at Minnesota and its Lutheran state church, saying, “The weather is terrible and the theology is enough to break a person’s heart,” he’s got it wrong. Grace doesn’t break hearts; it sets them free. When we live out of this gift, we are free to live for others the way God is free to love us. The shackles are off. For the first time in our lives, we’re traveling without luggage.

The freedom of the gospel is not an institution but an intuition, which in every generation and in every community produces a creative witness to the grace of God. So why do some people have trouble seeing this grace?

In his memoir *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis remembers that when his wife died, he did not ask, Is there a God? He asked, “What kind of God” do I have? This question, which is born of grief, loneliness, and doubt, was Luther’s question too.

Luther’s answer is worth hearing. There’s only one way to know, he said. Nature gives a mixed message. You can look at the grandeur of nature but also its ferocity.

The wisdom of philosophy may help a little, but it offers no redemptive story. Even when we examine ourselves and sift through our own feelings and dreams, the picture is far from clear. It's enough to make us beg, as one disciple did of Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father" (John 14:8).

Luther said in reply, just look at the cross. There you see God's truest self. If you want a picture of the very being of God, look at the cross. That's the side of God (which is really the heart of God) that makes all the difference.

In a world where gracelessness is the norm and grace the exception, where the rhetoric of hate and the practice of greed go hand in hand, where White supremacy mocks the supremacy of the Most High and the dignity of all human beings, where so many know the price of everything but the value of nothing, someone needs to tell the truth about Jesus. Not by resting on the struggles and triumphs of generations past, but simply by standing up for Christ's gospel. For the best liberators are those who have been liberated. The best lovers are those who know what it is to be loved. The best forgivers are those whose sins have been forgiven.

We don't need to defend the ancient fortress anymore. We are called, rather, to witness to the righteousness of God in whatever test is set before us. Then, by the grace of God and in the company of all who make the good confession, we take our place in the fellowship of those whose hearts have been set free.

This article is adapted from a book of Lischer's sermons, Just Tell the Truth: A Call to Faith, Hope, and Courage, published by William B. Eerdmans. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The prude and the lover."